

BEXLEY FEDERATION OF ALLOTMENTS & LEISURE GARDENERS

A GUIDE TO ORGANIC GARDENING



What is organic gardening?

HDRA's Organic Charter says:

The whole environment is much more than the sum of its individual parts.

The organic approach to gardening and farming recognises that the whole environment in which plants grow is much more than the sum of its individual parts, and that all living things are inter-related and inter-dependent.

First things first - Take care of the soil

Organic cultivation begins with the soil - good soil conditions means stronger plants which are better able to survive pests and disease.

Feed the soil: Bulky organic materials such as garden compost, leafmould and well-rotted manures will improve the structure of both clay soils and sandy soils as well as providing food for the plants.

Fork into the top few inches of soil or add to the surface as a mulch allowing worms to take it down into the soil.

Protect the soil: Only dig if necessary. Walking on the soil can compact it, try growing in beds no more than 4ft wide so that you can work from paths on either side.

Cover unoccupied ground with a mulch or green manures, particularly overwinter to protect the surface structure and fertility.

Crop rotation

Crops in the same botanical group should not be grown in the same space year after year. Include soil improvement and green manures in the crop rotation plan.

For example, a four year plan might be:

Start in winter, sow an overwintering green manure

Year 1 Spring, dig the green manure in with some well-rotted manure and plant potatoes. After harvesting, cover soil with leafmould

Year 2 - Sow roots - Carrots, Parsnips etc

Year 3 - Grow brassicas and mulch them with compost

Year 4 - Plant onions and legumes. When clearing legumes, leave the roots in the soil as this will put nitrogen back into the soil. Then sow an overwintering green manure.

Pests and Diseases

- ✓ Select varieties with resistance to pests and diseases
- ✓ Use crop rotation - leave as long a gap as possible before growing a crop from any one family in the same area to reduce pest and disease build up.
- ✓ Give each plant the space it needs to develop.
- ✓ Clear the ground between harvests so that fungi and pests are not being harboured in plant debris.
- ✓ Grow flowers such as marigolds to attract insects that feed on pests.
- ✓ Encourage frogs and beetles with a small log pile in a shady corner
- ✓ Put up physical barriers:
 - Fine mesh netting to keep off flying pests - make sure it is tucked into the soil all round. Large mesh netting will keep pigeons off of brassicas.
 - Squares of carpet underlay around brassica stems to protect from cabbage root fly.
 - Cut the bottom off of a plastic bottle to make a cloche or cut the top off as well to make a protective collar to keep slug away from individual plants.
- ✓ Butterfly eggs and caterpillars can be picked off by hand.
- ✓ Set traps for slugs, bury yogurt pots to within 2-3 cms of the rim and part fill with beer or stale milk. Or provide hiding places and collect the slugs by hand (or tongs).

Weeds

- ✓ Before sowing or planting, prepare ground by hoeing off annual weeds and digging out any perennial weeds.
- ✓ For early sowing, cover ground with cloches or clear plastic to encourage early weed growth.
- ✓ Hoe regularly between plants, carry a file to keep the hoe sharp.
- ✓ Mulch around larger plants, this will help to conserve moisture.
- ✓ Cover any vacant ground with a mulch or a green manure.
- ✓ Don't put perennial roots or weeds in flower in the compost bin.
- ✓ Soil is full of dormant seeds which are brought to the surface every time the ground is dug. So keep digging to a minimum.